

### Introduction to Lincoln forum: Lincoln and Ford, *Cahiers*, Spielberg, Obama

by Chuck Kleinhans

Forty years ago *Screen* (UK) published a translation of a landmark *Cahiers du cinéma* article on John Ford's 1939 film *Young Mr. Lincoln*. The recent occasion of the release of Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, directly following the Presidential election, invites reconsidering *Young Mr. Lincoln* in light of the new Lincoln film, the topic of historical bio films and their relation to present political events, and the fate and fortunes of the *Cahiers* ideological analysis. It also allows for a consideration of Spielberg's film beyond the immediate critical response that has tended to consider *Lincoln* in three aspects.

- First, many critics see it as another example of Spielberg's serious historical films, joining *Amistad* and *Schindler's List* among others, and another remarkable performance by Daniel Day Lewis.
- Second, the film has offered an opportunity for academic historians to complain about interpretations, biases, and omissions in the film compared to their professional interests.
- Third, looking at the film as a mirror of current events has provoked discussion of Obama and race in the United States today.

We've assembled a forum on Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* and Spielberg's *Lincoln* to expand and extend the consideration. I begin the forum with a summary of the progress of the *Cahiers'* *Young Mr. Lincoln* discussion over the years. Reconsidering critical discourse shows some interesting "gaps and fissures" in the progress of analysis and also provides a reminder that theory and criticism are always contingent, evolving, and much less authoritative than the theorists would like everyone to think. I also provide a set of links to some of the controversy around *Lincoln*.

Douglas Kellner's previous books on contemporary film, beginning with *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Film* (with Michael Ryan, 1988) and continuing with his acute analysis of media in the Bush-Cheney era, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-*

*Cheney Era* (2010), provide broad ranging synoptic overviews of the conflicting progressive and conservative tendencies in popular media as parallel to and expressive of antagonistic forces in U.S. cultural and political life. Here Kellner considers Spielberg's *Lincoln* as combining heroic individualism (the President's pragmatic efforts to achieve an idealistic end) with liberal discourses of equality and social justice. While best known as a commercially successful director of genre films, Spielberg has also aspired to being an auteur who addresses serious historical issues, as did John Ford in his career. For both reproduction of and intervention into ideology, the two directors used their expressive tools to reflect on history, in the form of dramatic narration in commercial popular forms. Kellner also reflects on Lincoln as a popular icon (as familiar as a penny and a \$5 bill) who can even, almost plausibly, appear as a silver axe-wielding vampire hunter.

Author of *Steven Spielberg's America* (2010), Frederick Wasser has trenchantly argued that the director operates within corporate Hollywood to work with liberal democratic ideals cast in the populism of an earlier period of the media industry. While presenting U.S. culture and history, Spielberg has found a lucrative global audience as well. Here in "*Lincoln*: shared myths in a revisionist age," Wasser extends his analysis to Spielberg's new film. Wasser sees that while *Cahiers* correctly noticed that *Young Mr. Lincoln* represses race and racism, that racial portrayal is obligatory in today's Hollywood. Spielberg and screenwriter Kushner omit the themes of labor and the frontier at the heart of *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Now, by including people of color as inherent to the Lincoln story they create a shared history for today's multicultural United States.

Gary Bettinson and Richard Rushton provided an excellent succinct summary of the *Cahiers Young Mr. Lincoln* essay in their book, *What is Film Theory? An Introduction to Contemporary Debates* (2010). Turning here to Spielberg's new film, they consider *Lincoln*'s core political contention, "equality before the law." The President's goal is to end the Civil War and to end slavery, but these outcomes are already known to the audience. Therefore the film uses a political procedural strategy to create suspense. While in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, as *Cahiers* argues, politics disappears under the depiction of Lincoln's moral destiny, in *Lincoln*, politics is shown to be above morality. Lincoln is shown to be superior to those around him, and his "flaws" are recast as effective virtues because argument and conflict are essential to the vision of a democratic politics.

Warren Buckland's *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (2006) offered a substantial argument about the director's hit films, arguing that his visual narration creates an immersive audience experience. In contrast to the frequent mention of Spielberg as based in sensational spectacle, Buckland concentrated on storytelling technique from the director's earliest television work to the biggest blockbusters. Here he pays attention to the *Cahiers Young Mr. Lincoln* piece with "Symptomatic reading in Althusser, *Cahiers du cinéma*,

and Žižek.” By turning from Althusser’s study of ideology to Žižek’s revision of the concept, Buckland effectively argues that the “gaps and fissures” key to *Cahiers* method are not revealing anomalies. Rather they rather function as necessary constituent parts of the film that make its operation possible. Rather than being a problem as *Cahiers* thought, symptoms are features.

Deborah Tudor also turns to Žižek, but to make a different point. In “The hysteric, the mother, the natural gal: male fantasies and male theories in films about Lincoln,” she re-considers the depiction of women across three cinematic versions of the legend. She picks up Žižek’s remarks that culture is marked by patriarchal logocentrism, which is usually taken to view the feminine as outside the male realm or woman as a mask. But, Žižek observes, the feminine isn’t outside but inside: as a male fantasy. Tudor finds this an alternative to the *Cahiers* psychoanalytic assertion that *Young Mr. Lincoln* makes Woman/Law/Nature equivalences. By seeing patriarchal commercial popular culture as always filtering through fantasy, Tudor finds the imbedded distortions in using female characters.

Continuing her notable work in film reception, Janet Staiger’s essay, “The significance of Steven Spielberg’s *Old Mr. Lincoln*: political emotions and intertextual knowledge,” asks what lessons viewers find in films. Recognizing the *Cahiers Young Mr. Lincoln* analysis as a key point for ideological film analysis, Staiger combines that impulse with reception studies, particularly new work on affect. Pointing out that emotional response can be in response to character situation and identification, she adds that it can also be provoked by resolutions of ethical, social, and political conflicts. Thus reading a film is shaped by current civic concerns as well as political allegiances. In the case of *Lincoln*: the situation of Barack Obama, the electoral scene, and even the context of Superstorm Sandy.

*Cahiers*’ contribution to ideological analysis has shaped film studies for decades. While controversial and corrected, the *Young Mr. Lincoln* essay continues to be a reference point for the more general enterprise of studying film in a social and political framework. Spielberg’s *Lincoln* clearly figures in the director’s commitment to use popular commercial forms to reframe understandings of history. That goal, evidenced in many notable U.S. films ranging from *Birth of a Nation* to *Malcolm X*, from *The Best Years of Our Lives* to *J. Edgar*, is always ideological and always needs examination.

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